

Introduction to Cultural Studies

Lecture 2:

Mimesis – Representation – Signs

1) Mimesis

2) Representation

3) Signs

1) Mimesis

[illustration]

Plato, 'The Allegory of the Cave' (Book VII of *The Republic*)

[Socrates is speaking to *Glaucon*]

And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened:—Behold! human beings living in a underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.

I see.

And do you see, I said, men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall? Some of them are talking, others silent.

You have shown me a strange image, and they are strange prisoners.

Like ourselves, I replied; and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave?

True, he said; how could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed to move their heads?

And of the objects which are being carried in like manner they would only see the shadows?

Yes, he said.

And if they were able to converse with one another, would they not suppose that they were naming what was actually before them?

Very true.

And suppose further that the prison had an echo which came from the other side, would they not be sure to fancy when one of the passers-by spoke that the voice which they heard came from the passing shadow?

No question, he replied.

To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.

That is certain.

And now look again, and see what will naturally follow if the prisoners are released and disabused of their error. At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive some one saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision,—what will be his reply? And you may further imagine that his instructor is pointing to the objects as they pass and requiring him to name them,—

will he not be perplexed? Will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him?

Far truer.

And if he is compelled to look straight at the light, will he not have a pain in his eyes which will make him turn away to take refuge in the objects of vision which he can see, and which he will conceive to be in reality clearer than the things which are now being shown to him?

True, he said.

And suppose once more, that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and held fast until he is forced into the presence of the sun himself, is he not likely to be pained and irritated? When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities.

Not all in a moment, he said.

He will require to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world. And first he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then the objects themselves; then he will gaze upon the light of the moon and the stars and the spangled heaven; and he will see the sky and the stars by night better than the sun or the light of the sun by day?

Certainly.

Last of all he will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of him in the water, but he will see him in his own proper place, and not in another; and he will contemplate him as he is.

Certainly.

He will then proceed to argue that this is he who gives the season and the years, and is the guardian of all that is in the visible world, and in a certain way the cause of all things which he and his fellows have been accustomed to behold?

Clearly, he said, he would first see the sun and then reason about him.

And when he remembered his old habitation, and the wisdom of the den and his fellow-prisoners, do you not suppose that he would felicitate himself on the change, and pity them?

Certainly, he would.

And if they were in the habit of conferring honours among themselves on those who were quickest to observe the passing shadows and to remark which of them went before, and which followed after, and which were together; and who were therefore best able to draw conclusions as to the future, do you think that he would care for such honours and glories, or envy the possessors of them? Would he not say with Homer,

‘Better to be the poor servant of a poor master, and to endure anything, rather than think as they do and live after their manner?’

Yes, he said, I think that he would rather suffer anything than entertain these false notions and live in this miserable manner.

Imagine once more, I said, such a one coming suddenly out of the sun to be replaced in his old situation; would he not be certain to have his eyes full of darkness?

To be sure, he said.

And if there were a contest, and he had to compete in measuring the shadows with the prisoners who had never moved out of the den, while his sight was still weak, and before his eyes had become steady (and the time which would be needed to acquire this new habit of sight might be very considerable), would he not be ridiculous? Men would say of him that up he went and down he came without his eyes; and that it was better not even to think of ascending; and if any one tried to loose another and lead him up to the light, let them only catch the offender, and they would put him to death.

No question, he said.

This entire allegory, I said, you may now append, dear Glaucon, to the previous argument; the prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world according to my poor belief, which, at your desire, I have expressed—whether rightly or wrongly God knows. But, whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally either in public or private life must have his eye fixed.

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1497/1497-h/1497-h.htm>

Mimesis:

basic theoretical principle in the creation of art. The word is Greek and means “imitation” (though in the sense of “re-presentation” rather than of “copying”). Plato and Aristotle spoke of mimesis as the re-presentation of nature. According to Plato, all artistic creation is a form of imitation: that which really exists (in the “world of ideas”) is a type created by God; the concrete things man perceives in his existence are shadowy representations of this ideal type. Therefore, the painter, the tragedian, and the musician are imitators of an imitation, twice removed from the truth. Aristotle, speaking of tragedy, stressed the point that it was an “imitation of an action”—that of a man falling from a higher to a lower estate. Shakespeare, in Hamlet's speech to the actors, referred to the purpose of playing as being “. . . to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature.” Thus, an artist, by skillfully selecting and presenting his material, may purposefully seek to “imitate” the action of life.

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1)

mimetic genres: music, painting, sculpture, drama, poetry (?)

diegetic genres: epic, novel

2)

What can/should be imitated?

Plato (428/27 – 348/47):	idea(l)s
Aristotle (384 – 322):	human action(s)
Shakespeare (1564 -1616):	nature

Auerbach:

- mimesis as a historically variable first principle in the history of Western art and literature, organising the 'methods of interpreting human events in the literature of Europe'
- realism(s) as a means of emancipation from the doctrine of 'the several levels of literary representation' > intrusions of realism (direct representation of speech, mixture of stylistic levels, seriousness of treatment, focus on the individual) as turning points in a history of increasing stylistic inclusiveness which culminates in 19th-century realism
- the relation between literature and reality is conceived of as a relation of straightforward depiction based on the worldview of the author (vs. Gebauer/Wulf: power, mediality, construction, access)

Mimesis as a Complex Social Practice (Gebauer/Wulf):

- resistance to theory/rationality
- historical variability
- subject to power
- an 'impure' concept

Core ingredients:

- identification
- practice <> knowledge
- performative bodily action > re-presentation

Orientations of Critical Theories (Abrams 1953ff.):

mimetic theories (Plato, Aristotle)

pragmatic theories (Horace)



expressive theories (Romanticism)

objective/reflexive theories (modernism/postmodernism)

The Western Tradition:

a) Antiquity:

mimetic and pragmatic criteria begin to dominate the production and reception of art and literature

→ the traditional Western attitude

b) the Middle Ages:

break in continuity because of cultural difference perceived as 'poverty' in the Renaissance period

c) Modernity:

marked by an ongoing negotiation of

traditional "objective",

i.e. mimetic and pragmatic dimensions of cultural meaning

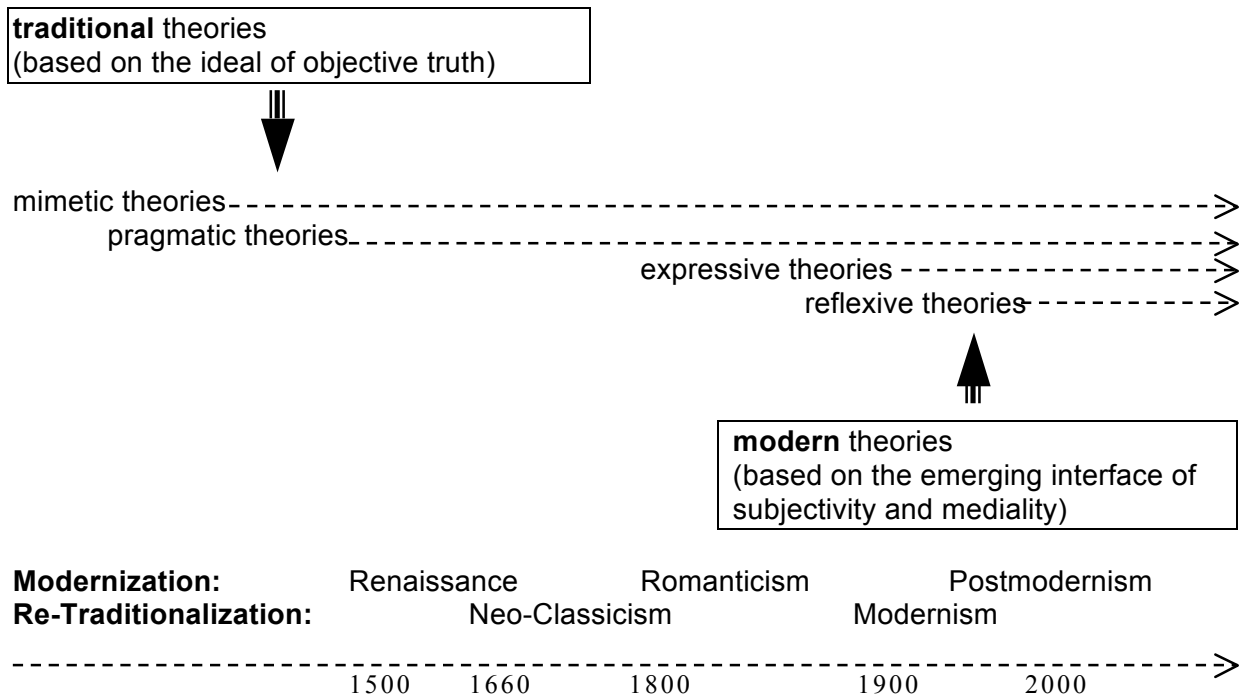
on the one hand and

modern "subjective",

i.e. expressive and reflexive dimensions of cultural meaning

on the other hand

The Basic Outline of a Systematic Approach to Western Culture (c. 1500-2013)

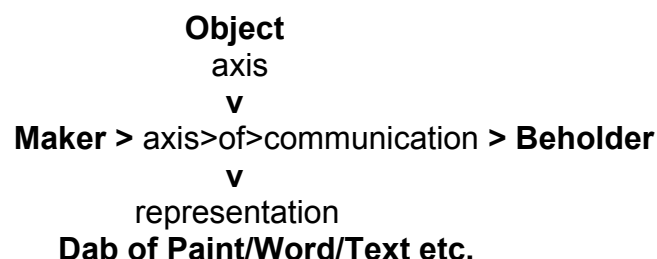


2) Representation

[cf. Mitchell 1995]

Definition(s):

- “representation is always *of* something or someone, *by* something or someone, *to* someone”
- a model of representation:



- semiotic/aesthetic representation vs. political representation
- systems/codes (e.g. media/mediality) vs. conventions (e.g. genres)
- representational relationships:
 - iconic (based on resemblance)
 - symbolic (based on arbitrary/cultural stipulation)
 - indexical (based on 'existential' relationship/connectedness)
 - > icon, symbol and index are three sign types according to the semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce

History:

- foundational concept in (Western) aesthetics and semiotics
- political understanding of representation added in the modern era
- long history of discomfort with the notion, going back to Plato (who viewed it negatively) and Aristotle (who introduced a pragmatic approach)
- idealist vs. realist theories of art and representation
- the challenge of expressionism and formalism
- 'postmodern' culture as an era of "hyper-representation" in which the former 'objects of representation' become mere representations themselves

Importance:

- man as the "representational animal"
- signs/representation as man's access to the world
- What is truth? Can we gain access to "the thing itself", "the authentic", "the real"?
- "the uncontrollability of representations"
- "Representation is that by which we make our will known and, simultaneously, that which alienates our will from ourselves in both the aesthetic and political spheres."

Definition of Realism:

Realism [...] can briefly be sketched as the assumption that it is possible, through the act of representation, in one semiotic code or another, to provide cognitive as well as imaginative access to a material, social reality that, though irreducibly mediated by human consciousness, and of course by language, is nonetheless independent of it.

(Beaumont 2010, 2)

3) Signs

[cf. Assmann 2012]

The use of signs for referring to the world both directly (iconical/indexical) or indirectly (symbolic) as well as for communicating and storing information is one of the distinctive capabilities of human beings as opposed to animals.

- > man as a 'symbol-using animal' (Kenneth Burke)
- > symbols/signs/words are disconnected from the world and constitute their own dynamics and energy (Burke: 'transcendence')
- > language scepticism and the 'linguistic turn'
- > ontological assumptions about the world are gradually replaced by constructivist assumptions

[Illustration: René Magritte, 'Les trahison des images' (1929)]

Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916)

- language as a system or structure of elements whose relation or opposition to each other is governed by codes
- meaning emerges from these relations and oppositions rather than from the signs' reference > it is conventional and arbitrary
- dichotomies: langue / parole
 signifiant /signifié
 synchronic / diachronic
- relations between signs:
 paradigmatic (axis of selection, principle of equivalence)
 vs.
 syntagmatic (axis of combination, principle of contiguity)
 > a basic paradigm of human perception and activity

Semiotics:

the systematic study of all the factors involved in the production and interpretation of signs or in the process of signification

- largely based on concepts of the sign as introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce
- a widening of the frame beyond literature
(cf. Roland Barthes on the *Mythologies* of everyday life, Umberto Eco on film, painting and architecture)
→ preparing the shift towards cultural studies
- e.g. Iurii M. Lotman's structural semiotics:
Natural language as 'primary modelling system' (PMS)
vs. 'secondary modelling systems' (SMS);
art, music and literature → artistic series
myth, religion and folklore → non-artistic series;
SMS add up to a complex semiotic totality: culture

**Roland Barthes, *Elemente der Semiotologie* (1964; Frankfurt/M. 1983)
[English version: *Elements of Semiology*. London 1967]**

- language + secondary systems of signification
- | | | | |
|-----------|---------------------|-------|----------|
| Barthes: | signifiant | (...) | signifié |
| Saussure: | signifiant/signifié | | |
- model is open for addressing larger cultural frameworks
- the signifié of the secondary (tertiary ...) level is never fixed
→ meaning production (semiosis) as a never-ending process

► Poststructuralism

- emerged at the end of the 1960s from critical discussions within structuralism
 - shared assumptions:
 - 1) language is constitutive for human dealings with reality
 - 2) the world is a world of signs, and signs are arbitrary (de Saussure)
- a new angle appeared with regard to the referential dimension of linguistic signs:

Structuralism

- > the unity of the sign
- > meaning resides in the sign, but the idea of reference persists (as a 'transcendental signified')
- > explanation/understanding (i.e. fixing) as aims

Poststructuralism

- > gap between signifiant and signifié (only the material dimension of the sign is accessible, meaning is problematic)
- > the cultural practice of using signs does not point beyond itself (there is no signified beyond semiosis)
- > openness and instability of meaning as fundamental assumption

Performative Language:

(cf. J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 1962)

- language does not only represent the world ('constative language') but it is also a form of action ('performative language')
- performative language relies on institutional frameworks (a parson declares a couple man and wife) and social conventions which make it likely that the speech act actually performs the function it indicates (making promises, welcoming somebody, swearing, apologizing, betting, expressing disapproval)
- in recent years the notion of performativity has been massively expanded (following Marshall McLuhan's idea that "the medium is the message"; cf. Loxley 2007)

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